**Acceptance**

*A chapter from “Come out the wilderness” by Bruce Kenrick, published by Collis Fontana Books, first issue 1952.*

It was 1954. Six years had passed since the ﬁrst storefront church had been opened in East Harlem. Those years had been packed with discoveries which had shocked and inspired the Group; discoveries about East Harlem’s hidden riches, about life and compassion and God; discoveries which had sometimes overthrown assumptions which they had always held, and which left them asking such questions as ‘Does morality matter to God?’ The answers had come not so much through argument as through the harsh impact of events.

' Reach!‘ said the leader of the Parish youth group, levelling a .45 automatic at the storekeeper’s stomach. As the man raised his hands, the group’s secretary emptied the till, and then the two backed out of the doorway and raced off down the street.'

East Harlem’s ideas on morality were very different from those of the Parish ministers. Aside from a tiny minority whose strong moral code gave structure to their lives, most people were so poorly educated, so lacking in stable home background, and so inﬂuenced by the local climate of injustice and of rackets that they had no clear moral standards at all.

‘God don‘t mind if you sin now and then, Reverend. He just don’t want you to make a habit of it.’ The 40-year-old Puerto Rican woman was speaking to one of the pastors in her apartment on 104th Street. They had been discussing the question of stealing, but now the subject moved to the son of whom she was so proud. It seemed that although she was not married, she had very much wanted to have a child of her own. She prayed that God give her a baby, made friends with a married man, and eventually had a son by him. The minister thought that the matter was worrying her.

‘If you’ve sincerely repented . . .’ he began. ‘Repented?’ she cried. ‘I ain’t repented! I asked the Lord for him! He’s a gift from God!’

In such a situation, where do you begin? Maybe in suburbia you can begin with judgment: where men believe themselves respectable and righteous and religious, perhaps you begin where Christ began with the Scribes and Pharisees. But in East Harlem, with its broken reeds which could so easily be crushed, in such a fragile situation, where do you start? The Group believed they were discovering an answer; it had to be given again and again to innumerable puzzled questioners.

‘What do you do?‘ asked a student volunteer as the Parish workers sat around the farmhouse ﬁre during one of their monthly retreats. ‘What do you do when you drop in on the church youth canteen and ﬁnd a man lying dead drunk on the ﬂoor, and a bottle of whisky being passed from hand to hand? Does the church condone this?’

‘No, the church does not condone it,’ came the slow but decided reply. ‘That’s why we have a rule that no drunks will be allowed into church dances.’ The pastor hesitated, and then went on. ‘ But we are not primarily instruments of God's judgement . . . and neither was Christ. We can judge in preaching or in counselling—providing we’ve ﬁrst felt a greater judgment on ourselves as responsible for the social situation which produces these results. But our ministry is first one of acceptance. Our primary job is to communicate God’s forgiveness of such drunks as you saw in the church canteen. Don’t men like him stand a better chance of going straight inside the church than out‘? And isn’t it true that after what happened on Good Friday, the Church of God is open to all, no matter how they may live?’

No matter how they may live . . . One man who used to belong to the Parish was undoubtedly a convert, was not married to the mother of his children, would get drunk with depressing regularity, and rented a room in his apartment to a prostitute. ‘What do you do?’ the question persisted. And the answer of the group was becoming quite clear: ‘Christ didn’t come with a law book in his hand to bless only those who would obey it,’ said the pastor. ‘He came to save those who couldn’t save themselves. And this means that East Harlem's moral wrecks are simply the people who stand in the greatest need of the church's love. It means that we accept them exactly where they are and as they are.’

The discovery that their ministry had to involve unconditional acceptance of all men ‘exactly where they are and as they are ’ had been made by the Group as they faced three things. First, there was the background from which East Harlem's moral chaos sprang. Second, there was the conventional churches’ futile response in terms of condemnation. And third, there was the fact that this response was a ﬂat contradiction of the Gospel.

The background to East Harlem’s moral turmoil had had made it perfectly plain to the Group that they themselves were in no position whatever to condemn. They thought of a boy whose father was a drunkard and whose mother was mentally unstable; he had been expelled from school for bad behaviour and was trying to forget his problems by taking heroin. There was the seventeen year old girl whose mother had left home ‘for a few days’ with a man friend, who had since been caring single handed for three small children, and now gone out of her mind. There was Charlie, a young man whose father was a thief and whose mother was a prostitute; he won recognition at home by what he could steal from the stores. And most of East Harlem’s adult thieves and addicts and near demented individuals were what they were for reasons like these, reasons altogether beyond their control. To judge such people was like abusing a baby for being born a cripple.

Yet judgement seemed to be the traditional church’s first word in East Harlem. It almost seemed as if the first concern was not to bring the lost sheep home but to keep the lost sheep out in cast they impaired the church’s reputation for respectability. ‘But this attitude that the church is only for respectable people would exclude most of its finest saints,’ wrote Don Benedict. ‘No one in his senses would call St Francis a respectable man, for what respectable man would rummage in a garbage can for his breakfast, and what respectable man would embrace a filthy, blasphemous leper? Clearly, Francis was not respectable. And equally clearly, he was redeemed. And the church realises that it has a greater desire for a respectable community than for a redeemed one, it must also realise that its whole attitude to morality, and its whole conception of the Gospel of Christ, is being called into question.’

The self deception behind this ‘holier-than-thou’ attitude lay in the fact that those in the church who condemned the drunk and the harlot were by no means innocent themselves. A girl who was a Sunday School teacher in a near by church became pregnant, and Bill Webber over heard the matter being discussed by some of her fellow members. ‘It’s shameful!’ declared a Puerto Rican lady. ‘And her a leader in the church!’ the speaker had five children by the man with whom she had been living for six years; she had yet to take the step of getting married. This was one of a thousand instances which had forced the Group to the conclusion that East Harlem’s prodigals were avoiding their Father’s house not because of their Father at all but because of their elder brothers, who were Christian, immoral, without pity and without mercy. It was perfectly clear that of those who applied the rigorous ‘Christian’ standard, many kept it merely because it was expedient to do so (that was the way to keep your job and to gain social prestige),and even then they kept it only in those areas of life which were open to inspection by others. In other words, they themselves were guilty men. ‘And,’ asked Benedict, ‘if God were as harsh in his judgement of them as they were in their judgement of others, would they themselves be saved?’

Nevertheless, they were harsh in their judgement, as many a man like Charlie the thief had discovered for himself. Charlie had been to church once in his life. He had gone, as he said, ‘tho hear about Christ’, but instead he heard about judgement. He had gone seeking Christ, but, finding the Law, he departed for good without Christ. Such men were being hardened by the church in their lives of crime and wretchedness; the judgement of the church had separated them from the one community that ought to be able to help them.

An elder in a local Pentecostal church was a woman with a twenty year old son called Tiny. She knew that he was using heroin, and she had followed the example of her pastor by bitterly condemning him and warning him of judgement to come. One day she found Tiny’s injection kit hidden above the toilet.

' You been usin‘ that stuff again!’ she cried.

‘You ain't see me use nothin‘,‘ said Tiny sullenly.

‘I may not see you use nothin',' she shouted, ‘but I can tell when you done it. D'you hear? I can tell!’

And Tiny lost control. ‘You see how you is?’ he yelled. ‘You talkin', and ravin’ like that at me. . . . You made me use it!’

Such tragic incidents as this convinced the Group that judgment was useless. The moralistic approach would separate them from those they wanted to befriend; it also presupposed the acceptance of a moral code to which, in fact, many East Harlem residents were totally indifferent. As they wrote some time later: ‘If we say, “ Don’t commit adultery,” the answer may well be, “ Why not?” And if we go on to say. “it’s against the Ten Commandments," the reply is “*The Ten Commandments* was a punk movie, anyway.”’

So the approach by way of morality was rejected, partly because it was useless, partly because it was irrelevant, but above all because the pastors slowly realised that morality (with which their own faith had always been involved) often stood in stubborn opposition to the Gospel. After all, they argued, the object of morality is to preserve the status quo, and the object of the Gospel is often to overturn the status quo (‘these that have turned the world upside down’). Morality exalted the Law over the Gospel; it forgot that David did not lose the Spirit of God even though he had committed both adultery and murder; it said to the East Harlem girl who had never known her father, who had seen her mother living with several men, and who had no resources or reasons for resisting the offer of affection which left her carrying a baby ----to such a love starved creature, morality declared, ‘You can’t join the church until you marry the father of your child.’ To the girl, morality seemed a cruel mockery. To the Group it seemed a cheap betrayal of the agony of Christ, for he had died ‘not to condemn the world, but that the world, through him, might be saved.’ On the one hand, the church seemed to say to the world, ‘Christ alone can put your life straight’; and on the other hand, it said to the addicted convert, ‘But before you can belong to the church, you’ll have to put your own life straight.’ It proclaimed from the pulpit, ‘The Cross is the power of God unto salvation,’ and then it directed men to find their power not in the Cross but in themselves.

The pastors saw that this was a plain denial of the Gospel, a denial of the fact that God’s attitude to men simply does not depend on men’s attitude to God. They thought of Paul on the Damascus road when Christ stopped him in his tracks, forgave him outright, and made him an apostle before he even had a chance to repent. They remembered Christ hanging on the Cross, praying for his unrepentant crucifiers: ‘Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.’ These were events far removed from the world of morality, a world whose irrelevance lay in the fact that it had no power at all. By contrast, the Group declared, the Gospel is a Gospel of power. It is not a demand but a gift; it is not the Ten Commandments, nor the Sermon on the Mount, but only through the power of the living Christ do the Sermon and Commandments become possibilities. God’s Good News, they insisted, is not that he calls men to morality but that he calls them to Christ, to the Christ who accepts mean little misers like Zacchaeus, and by that acceptance brings his strength into their lives.

This means that there was an answer to the question of the woman who opened the door to the visiting pastor on 100th Street: she knew the he was aware of the fact that she was living with someone else’s husband; she imagined he had come to condemn her; she frowned as she asked, ‘Why do you visit me?’ the pastor was silent for a while before he said, ‘If the church were only interested in saints, I guess it would have no place for me.’ He paused again, reflectively; and then: ‘It seems to me that God is more interested in loving us than in condemning us.’ The woman hesitated, and then managed a faint smile as she said, ‘Wont you come in?’

Such a woman, like every other person in East Harlem, was already loved and accepted by Christ; she might not know it, but she already belonged to him. This was the bed-rock Gospel fact on which the pastor’s attitude was based. Christ, they read, ‘is above all and through all and in all’: to reject the pimp and the prostitute was to reject the risen Christ; to accept them was to accept him who said, ‘ As you did to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.’ ‘We classify men good and bad’, protested Benedict in a sermon. ‘We range them before our judgement seat and say, “You are a saint. And you are just a man. But you are a sinner. All this group are sinners. You. And you. And . . .“ But there we stop. For this man standing down among the sinners has nail prints in his hands . . . He looks at us. We feel uneasy on our throne. We are afraid. He’s judging us. . . .’

‘So the Body of Christ, the church,’ wrote the Group, ‘must accept those who drink, use narcotics, steal, have out-of-wedlock sex experience. The church is set in the midst of the world not to protect its life but to give its life away, that men may know the Good News of a God who loves them.‘

All this exposed the church to the acid judgment of its critics: ‘Look at the people they let in! What kind of church is this?’ It was a church that was soon to discover much more about Christian ethics. But at least it was a church that was earning the same abuse that Jesus bore when he accepted racketeers and prostitutes. And at least it was a church that was bearing fruit, as even little children testiﬁed.

The Sunday School class had been asked to describe the kind of people who come to church. ‘Big people come to church,’ said one. ‘Children come to church.’ said’ another. ‘Fat people come to church,‘ said a third. 'Yes,’ a small boy‘s voice piped up, surely delighting his Maker s heart. ‘and bad people come to church.’